



## Developing Peer-to-Peer Support Groups

Speaker 1: You are listening to a SAFLEO Sessions Podcast, a production of the National Suicide Awareness for Law Enforcement Officers Program. The SAFLEO Program is funded through grants from the Bureau of Justice Assistance, BJA, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The points of view and opinions expressed in this podcast are those of the podcast authors and do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice. Here's your host.

Floyd W.: I'm Floyd Wiley with the National Suicide Awareness for Law Enforcement Officers Program. Thank you for joining me for this SAFLEO Sessions Podcast. I am joined today by also George Mussini, who is a 22-year veteran of the Baltimore County, Maryland, Police Department. George has served in numerous positions for his agency to include the position of training officer for the Baltimore County Police Department.

In 2016, while off duty, Officer George Mussini was involved in a critical incident when a male subject with a huge knife began stabbing a female in a Maryland train station. George intervened and did everything to avoid the confrontation until he ultimately had to stop the attack with his firearm. After that incident, he developed a peer-to-peer support group for his agency. George, it's great to have you here today. How's it going?

George M.: Doing great, Floyd. Thanks for having me.

Floyd W.: Absolutely. I want to talk to you about the peer-to-peer support program that you developed and how peer-to-peer support is so important and can play a role with law enforcement officers that

have been involved in critical incidents. After your critical incident, you took the initiative to start the peer-to-peer support group at your agency. So, let's start off with why you started that group.

George M.: The reason why is that I had people coming up to me privately and saying, "Hey man, I've been involved in a shooting before. I've been involved in a critical incident," but all these were locker room conversation, sidebar conversations. Nobody wanted to talk about it out loud, and there was no forum for us to talk about it. So, I figured I can't be the first person to have these feelings that maybe I need somebody to talk to about the incident. There's got to be other people that need and want the same thing. So, that was the reason why we started it.

Floyd W.: What was the mission of the peer-to-peer when you first started it in terms of who it was going to affect and who would be able to take advantage of it?

George M.: The original idea was to provide a safe, secure, confidential setting for officers within the agency to be able to talk, vent, and get assistance if they needed it.

Floyd W.: And in order to get that to be an effective support group, what were some of the things—the hurdles you had to deal with in terms of trust and making sure that people felt as though they could come and speak without their information being leaked out?

George M.: What we did was we went a little bit different. We set it up through our FOP union. We had full support from the president of our union, and we used our meeting hall as a location. And we started off as word of mouth, people that we knew had already been involved in critical incidents, people that were willing to talk about them. And we set it up with a strict confidentiality. What's said there, heard there, done there, stays there when you leave there, and having a small group at first—that was very easy to do.

Floyd W.: Right. How much time was put into that to get it off the ground?

George M.: Honestly, it didn't take too long. We started in January 2016, and now here we are four years later. It did take some time to grow the popularity. At first, the group was small. We averaged about six people, then 12 people. Four years later, we're averaging 45-50 people. We even have dispatchers, firefighters, other law enforcement officers and deputies coming from surrounding jurisdictions, so we have an open-door policy with our group.

Floyd W.: That's outstanding that you were able to bring some of our outside brothers and sisters that are also exposed to a lot of the critical incidents that we are, but from a different angle. It's great that you're able to bring them in under that umbrella to help assist them too.

In talking with you and seeing what has transpired over the last year, you have a chief now that's involved, so you have sort of a top-down approach on this. And can you just talk to us a little bit about that?

George M.: Yeah. After the program's been running for a bit, we had a new chief appointed to our agency, and she heard that we had a peer-to-peer group through the union and she asked to meet with us. Myself and some of the other organizers of the group went up and spoke with her, and what we found interesting was that she didn't want any involvement with the program as far as knowing who was attending and what was being said—she wanted to know what our mission was and how she could support our mission without being involved and without being a roadblock for us.

Floyd W.: Which is absolutely crucial because it shows the line officers, and the rest of the agency for that matter, that they have support in critical incidents or just day-to-day operations with the vicarious trauma that a lot of us are exposed to over the long-term of our careers.

Let me ask you, what are some of the challenges that you're facing right now with it? What's the future look like? How are you maintaining it administratively?

George M.: We continue to have a core group of the original officers that started the program. Some of the challenges are—right now, with the COVID-19 situation, is finding a venue that is safe enough. While we were restricted from meeting in larger groups, our numbers were put out to the entire agency so that way if anybody needed to talk or needed access to a resource, they could reach us directly by phone or email.

Floyd W.: And what's some of the feedback that you're getting? I mean, as far as how officers are feeling now that they have this peer-to-peer—they have someone to talk to, they have someone to share what they're going through, through this program. What's some of the feedback that you're getting?

George M.: We're getting a lot of positive feedback. Obviously, most people won't say, "Hey, I go to peer-to-peer." It will be word of mouth. But the good thing about this is that we have a ton of work-related issues that people bring up, but we're also there for family issues, relationship issues—basically any topic is a go. When you come up there, whatever's plaguing your mind, whatever's stressing you out, you can talk about. Overall, the supervisors within the agency have made referrals to us. "Hey, can you talk to this guy or girl?" A lot of people are embracing this, which is nice to see.

Floyd W.: Right. And you hear a lot of people—they use the terminology of "stopping the stigma," but I think that it's more so—and that's a little cliché-ish, but I'll say that I think it's more so a fear to actually come out and discuss some of these things because it puts some of us in a vulnerable situation, but I think it's a much needed conversation, and a lot of times, you feel like you have a little more trust when you're talking to peer-to-peer.

I want to ask you one other thing. Let's talk about a setting for your spouses and partners.

George M.: What we wanted to do is—we realized in order to have a healthy law enforcement relationship or career, your spouse, your partner, your family, they need to be understanding of what you're going through, but they need support as well because the stress will

transfer to them. What we've done is with our peer group—we have certain nights that are basically family night, where you can bring up your child or your spouse or your partner, and they can partake in the conversation with us. Once in a while, we'll have presentations from different clinicians or resources that we've been affiliated with, so including the family into the peer support model is absolutely crucial and beneficial to our mission.

Floyd W.: George, I have to say to you that that's powerful, and I can't express it enough. I wish that I had had that during my time in law enforcement. My spouse, even to this day, was exposed to that because we all have some residual effects from this most noble job that we love, law enforcement. And I think that's really huge, so I want to commend you on that. And I also think it's important to our viewers to understand that we signed up for this job—our spouses and our family members didn't. So, for you to create that avenue, I just really commend you on that.

Do you have anything else you want to just put out there in terms of the peer-to-peer—other officers being able to develop their own, if they don't have it, just some suggestions, some things that might be an asset to them with their agencies?

George M.: Yeah. One, totally recommend setting up a peer-to-peer group if you don't have one already. Don't expect immediate gains. This is a process that requires trust building, so your group will start off small. It will take time to build. Constantly reinforce the confidentiality portion. Don't mention names when referring to incidents. Line yourself up with service providers in your area. Find out which ones are familiar with working with first responders. We have an awesome network of service providers, clinicians, counselors, even treatment clinics. Take time, make sure you get the support from your administration. If you don't, do something on the outside. Just do it on your own like we did. We're fortunate that we've earned the respect and support from our administration and supervisors.

Floyd W.: Well, George—want to thank you for taking the time to speak with me today on this very important topic of developing peer-to-peer

support groups. I encourage our listeners to visit SAFLEO website at [safleo.org](http://safleo.org). That is S-A-F-L-E-O.org. Until later, stay safe, stay well, and stay healthy.

Speaker 1: The SAFLEO Program is dedicated to providing training, technical assistance, and resources to law enforcement agencies, staff, and families to raise awareness, smash the stigma, and reduce and prevent law enforcement suicide. For additional information regarding the SAFLEO Program, please visit [safleo.org](http://safleo.org), that's S-A-F-L-E-O.org. Follow us on Facebook and Twitter.

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